

THE STUDY OF MAN

CLASS AND SOCIOLOGY

"The Shadow of Marxism"

IRVING KRISTOL

TWENTIETH-CENTURY America is perhaps the most egalitarian society the civilized world has ever seen, yet nowhere has there been so much solemn brooding over "class" as in this place at this time. Doubtless this has something to do with the very fact of equality itself. As the infinitely wise Tocqueville pointed out: "When inequality of conditions is the common law of society, the most marked inequalities do not strike the eye: when everything is nearly on the same level, the slightest are marked enough to hurt it." But in the case of America, this normal (or should one rather say abnormal?) preoccupation with class distinctions is aggravated by the presence of a large body of sociologists whose sensitivity toward the subject is refined to an extreme. Why this should be so is not entirely clear. Would a sociological study show a positive correlation between degrees of personal envy and a predisposition to a sociological career? Or would it demonstrate that sociologists, constituting one of the newer professions, are thereby exceptionally concerned with all matters of status? These questions are rhetorical, of course, since such a sociological study is most unlikely to be made. In its absence, one must fall back on mere history, which suggests that there was a very intimate connection—often a very personal connection—between the origins of modern sociology and the rise of the various 19th-century movements for equal rights, prison reform, improvement of public health, eradication of juvenile

delinquency, and the general renovation of society as a whole in an egalitarian direction. This meliorist and leveling impulse, though by no means the only one working within sociology, has remained dominant. At times, it has been enfeebled to nothing more than an *a priori* anthropological skepticism toward the institutions of one's own society; at other times it has gathered critical momentum and generated around itself a full-blown climate of radical dissent. Whatever the case, it has found the subject of "class" so congenial to its temper that it holds on to it with a loving tenacity, fondling and worrying it the way a bulldog does his bone.

THE fascination with "class" helps sustain among sociologists an inquisitiveness, disguised as scholarly curiosity, which might otherwise become intolerably monotonous, even to them. This is certainly the case with the various studies of what is called in the profession "The Web of Interaction"—i.e., what happens to a young businessman and his friends as he grows older and more prosperous, how his wife behaves to his colleagues as against his superiors and inferiors, and so on: the theme has recently been dredged by Hollywood until we are familiar with every piece of dirt. We know that far-sighted young men put on "company manners" when their bosses invite them over to dinner; that when a man gets promoted he can no longer have the same easy relations with his former fellow workers; that a man's rise in the world is exemplified in the kind of house and the kind of neighborhood he lives in. This holds true for America today as it did for England in the 19th century, or France in the 18th, or Italy in the

IRVING KRISTOL, a former editor of *COMMENTARY* and a steady contributor to this magazine, has been co-editor of *Encounter* in London since its inception four years ago.

15th
mort
be so
T
this
erous
Profe
maki
ness,
tion:
fairly
or th
them
Profe
quest
possib
somet
not o
quest
radica
so m
never
Tw
really
atedne
metho
plore
ber's g
sociolo
both v
I mea
that is
the sty
course
"the m
ceptan
tion,"
dip in
senten
actual
us tha
for bio
that we
fact its
dignati
pered l
tion of
dulges
he refe
\$15,000
*The
Kahl, R
tion: A
Process,
540 pp.

15th, or Byzantium in the 9th. In the immortal words of Ernest van den Haag, it may be sociology but it isn't news.

There are, also, inevitably, occasions when this preoccupation gives rise to what may generously be called a slanted perspective. Thus, Professor Richard Centers, in the course of making a study of American "class-consciousness," went around asking the following question: "Do you think working people are *usually* fairly and squarely treated by their employers, or that employers *sometimes* take advantage of them?" The italics are mine, but the bias is Professor Centers'. Obviously the "or" in this question is not a real disjunction: it is quite possible for employers to be usually fair and sometimes unfair—indeed in strict logic, it is not only possible but necessary. The other five questions, in Professor Centers' "conservatism-radicalism battery" (his name for it) are not so markedly pointed; but pointed they are, nevertheless.

Two recent books*—advanced textbooks, really—are free from such egregious opinionatedness. Professor Kahl's summary of the methods by which American sociologists explore our class structure, and Professor Barber's general survey (after Talcott Parsons) of sociological theory on the subject of class, are both very good books of their kind—by which I mean there is very little wrong with them that is not wrong with sociology itself. Even the stylistic infelicities are below par for the course. When Professor Kahl observes that "the most ambitious people gained social acceptance by deliberately cultivating interaction," only those who have had no cause to dip into sociological literature will find the sentence more mysteriously suggestive than it actually is. And if Professor Barber informs us that "sons are fairly often unlike fathers, for biological, psychological, and social reasons that we do not wholly understand, though the fact itself seems to be fairly clear," one's indignation at being taken for an idiot is tempered by admiration for his judicious repetition of the word "fairly." Mr. Kahl even indulges in little dashes of dry wit, as when he refers to all those who make more than \$15,000 a year as "plutocrats," and to those

in the \$7,500-\$15,000 bracket as "opulent." (At least I *think* it's wit.) This to some extent compensates us for having to grope through some very foggy exactitudes (e.g., prestige is "a sentiment in the minds of men that is expressed in interpersonal interaction").

NEVERTHELESS, despite their virtues as against the general run of the species, both books display a "class-orientation" that is bound to strike the lay reader as decidedly peculiar. Indeed, on the very first page of his book, Professor Kahl engages in an extraordinary bit of exegesis which serves as a signal of things to come. He quotes a well-known statement by Alexander Hamilton: "All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and the well-born, the other the mass of the people. . . . The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. . . . Give, therefore, to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second, and, as they cannot receive any advantage by a change, they therefore will ever maintain a good government."

Professor Kahl interprets this text as follows: "As Hamilton said, the rich sought social stability to preserve their advantages, but the poor worked for social change that would bring them more of the world's rewards."

Now, Hamilton clearly did *not* say any such thing. He was expressing a classical republican sentiment, shared by practically all thinkers of the age, that the enlightened and wealthy were better disposed to "maintain a good government" than the poor and uninformed, who were incapable of judging right—even of judging their own interests right. Professor Kahl quotes Hamilton, one surmises, in order to put on record a neo-Marxist thesis without raising any super-patriotic hackles. But Hamilton was not any kind of a Marxist; he was not even a sociologist.

The shadow of Marx does seem to lie heavily on both works. Neither author, one supposes, is any kind of Marxist; but the effort to be "sociological" appears to make them Marxists despite themselves. Professor Barber is the greater sinner in this respect. He uses the term "ideology" to refer indiscriminately to the Soviet government's claim to have established a classless society, to Edmund Burke's vision of government by a "natural aristoc-

**The American Class Structure*, by Joseph A. Kahl, Rinehart, 310 pp., \$6.00; *Social Stratification: A Comparative Analysis of Structure and Process*, by Bernard Barber, Harcourt, Brace, 540 pp., \$6.50.

racy," and to the medieval belief that society *should* be hierarchical in character. The latter two examples may be philosophically false, but it is hard to see in what way they are "ideological"; they may be disputed but they cannot be "exposed." Only to a non-Stalinist Marxist can all three be treated as "ideologies," and Professor Barber is probably nothing of the sort. One suspects that what he wants to do is to register his disapproval of all of these three non-egalitarian attitudes, and that he cannot think of doing so except in Marxist terms because these terms have become naturalized within modern sociology.

Or, to take another example, Professor Barber writes of political parties: "Whenever they have existed, parties have tended to be, in an important degree, at once products of class consciousness and instruments for the pursuit of class interest." This is true. But it is not the whole truth. What Professor Barber never gets round to mentioning is that, wherever political parties have existed, they have tended to be, in an important degree, products of a conception of the common good and instruments for the pursuit of it. Were it not for the fact that this second truth complemented the first, civil war would be the natural state of human society. I am certain that Professor Barber knows all this; I am even reasonably confident that he would agree with it. He doubtless put things in such a partial way because, whereas to say that political parties serve class interests sounds properly "sociological," to say that they serve the common good does not.

PROFESSOR KINGSLEY DAVIS, in his preface to Professor Kahl's book, remarks that "... there has sometimes been a tendency in historical, economic, or political writing to avoid coming to grips directly with class phenomena. It almost seems as if the facts of human inequality are too unpleasant to the social scientist, so that he loses his objectivity or his courage." He goes on further to say: "Not until the 1930's and 1940's, when the great depression forced us to re-examine our precepts, did serious study of social stratification begin in this country." This depression baby has now come of age with a vengeance. It sees in Class a challenge, a mystery to be unveiled, a sanctum to be profaned. Hence the fondness for the word "realities," uttered in a tone of defiance. Professor Kahl writes: "...The central

aim of this book is a description of the realities of the American class system. . . ." One is taken by surprise. What else could a book on *The American Class Structure* deal with, except the realities?

The oddest thing is that, when this holy of holies is penetrated by the armed sociologist, it is found to be quite empty. Prepared to smash idols, he finds himself slashing the air. After much painstaking investigation, American sociologists have discovered that what the average American believes about the class structure of his particular community, and what the average sociologist finds out to be the case, largely coincide.* On this point, both Professors Barber and Kahl agree.

Barber: "Current evidence shows that just as the majority of a population has at least a rough and implicit knowledge of the class structure of its society, so also the majority knows roughly where it belongs in the class hierarchy."

Kahl: "We are justified in concluding that most American small towns have a prestige ranking that can be described with reasonable agreement by the ratings of local informants, but we must remain suspicious concerning claims that the informants will agree about divisions into clearcut strata."

It will have been noted that both statements have built-in reservations. Professor Kahl's "suspicion" that people are likely to disagree about "divisions into clear-cut strata" is the less easily comprehensible, since the bulk of his book relates how sociologists themselves fall out on this matter (e.g., Warner's six divisions, Hollingshead's five, Kaufman's eleven, among them ringing all the changes on combinations of "upper," "middle," and "lower"). But Professor Barber's statement about "the majority" is modified by a genuine and understandable concern for the minority, whom he finds to suffer from "a considerable amount of either ignorance or vague knowledge about the system of stratification"; and he is particularly shocked to come across people who say blandly that they do not know what class

*This does not, of course, prevent sociologists from regarding these discoveries as part of a grand accumulation of knowledge. Most of the experiments made in chemistry or physics, one never hears about: the results having been inconclusive or uninteresting, they are not reported in the scientific journals. In sociology, every bit of research gets "written up" and most of it gets published.

they are in. What on earth are we to do with such people?

Before someone comes forward with a program for mass education in sociology as the only possible solution, one might propose the hypothesis that when there is a substantial quantity of indecision about what class one inhabits, this might itself be an attribute of the particular "class structure." Not only is there evidence for this hypothesis. The evidence strikes me as being overwhelming; and it is all in Professor Barber's book. Thus, when S. Stansfeld Sargent asked a sample of 200 residents of Ventura, California, to divide the population into categories, less than one-half answered in terms of socio-economic class; while Gerhard Lenski found that, even though most Americans agreed on the relative position in an upper-lower continuum of any particular family in their community, they did not think of their community as being made up of "classes." Is this mere ignorance? Or is it, instead, a kind of knowledge? To take another and more revealing example, also quoted by Professor Barber, of this phenomenon. Neal Gross, in Minneapolis, asked his sample three different kinds of questions: (1) "What class do you belong to?" Thirty-one per cent answered middle class, 11 per cent working class, 20 per cent didn't know, 15 per cent said there were no classes in Minneapolis, and another 15 per cent gave utterly miscellaneous answers. (2) "What class do you belong to—upper, middle, or lower?" Seventy-five per cent said middle class. (3) The sample was given a choice among four classes—upper, middle, working, and lower. Forty-five per cent said they were working class, 42 per cent middle class. Surely when such slight difference in the phrasing of questions results in such wildly disparate answers, the difficulty is not with the people who answer but with the very idea behind the questions?

THIS idea is the idea of class, which plays a far greater role in the sociological imagination than in American society. Of course there are classes in America. But there are so many, and the relations between them are so intricate, that it is impossible honestly to see them as constituting a "class structure." Professor Barber is moved to lament this irregular state of affairs:

"Though the political, religious, military, economic, educational, and scientific elites in

modern society are all ranked about equally in the system of stratification, there is no institutionalized ideology about their proper relations.

"This ambiguity causes certain ranking problems for complex modern industrial societies. For how are highly specialized roles of one kind to be compared with highly specialized roles of another kind, if each kind is *in general* valued about equally?" (author's italics).

But this ambiguity is not an ambiguity at all—it is a fact. And it does not cause any ranking problems for modern industrial societies, only for modern industrious sociologists. If the relative position of the various elites is so vague and fluctuating, what is to be gained by the sociologists' pseudo-precision?

It is a premise of current sociological research that the presence of *classes* implies the existence of a *class structure*—a phrase which assumes that, given one piece of information about a person's class position, a great deal of other information flows from it as a corollary. There are certainly times and places when this is so; but the United States in the 20th century does not seem to be one of them. To know the way a man is likely to vote, we have to know, at any particular time, his income, his occupation, his race, his location in the nation's geography, his religion, his father's occupation, what voluntary organizations he belongs to, his ethnic background, and other things besides. Here, we have to know a great deal in order to deduce a very little.

This confusion between the existence of classes and the supposition of a class structure is further confounded by the problem of "class interests." Both Professors Kahl and Barber wrestle mightily with this problem, and the ensuing tangle is awesome to behold. The notion of "class interests," within the Marxist scheme, plays the role of ineluctable Fate in a Greek drama: "in the last analysis," the willful individual recognizes his "class interest" (i.e., his Fate) and surrenders himself to it—the reality principle, in the form of the historical drive toward socialism, asserts itself against all vain human imaginings and pretensions. Marxism is at least perceptive and consistent enough to realize that it is not possible to define "class interests" apart from a broader conception of the common good. Professor Barber dodges this issue. He deduces from the fact that the lower classes tend to

vote for "left" political parties which favor greater social and economic equality, the conclusion that "the lower classes are on the whole conscious of their economic and social interests and rationally support the parties that strive to achieve those interests." But, unless he is a convinced Marxist, this is plainly absurd. The "interests" of the lower—or any other—classes are not automatically predetermined; and being selfish is not the same as being rational. If one believed that, under the circumstances, greater social and economic equality would have undesirable consequences for society as a whole (including the lower classes in it), then the actions of the lower classes in voting "left" could no longer be regarded as rational, and would instead be seen as a violation of their own "interests," due to ignorance or false ideology. In all cases, this is a question of one's political philosophy, not at all of sociology. When Professor Richard Centers asserts (as quoted by Professor Barber) that "it is widely recognized that it is the worker rather than the proprietor or manager who stands to gain from a socialist order of affairs," he is not stating a sociological fact but a political belief—and one that is, if "widely recognized," not exactly unanimously agreed upon.

In the United States, as we have seen, most people have a pretty good idea of what classes there are in their community, and which one they belong to. If they have no such good idea, it is because they are the kinds of people who do not like to bother thinking about such things or because, in the absence of an articulated "class structure," they simply cannot, with right, place themselves in any one class. Whether or not all of these people are acting according to their "class interests," depends on what "class interests" one ascribes to them—that is, it depends on the observer's political philosophy. But we can go a step further and say, with some confidence: it *cannot* be desirable for people to get the impression that they need have no political philosophy and that if they act in the most short-sighted, selfish, and materialistic way, they are thereby behaving "rationally," in accordance with their "class interests," as sealed with approval by something called Sociology.

THROUGHOUT both of these books there is a consistent tone of censoriousness against modern society. This is, in itself, to be com-

mended, since modern society is certainly open to reproach. But what is distressing is that the censoriousness is never candid and explicit; it is sly, devious, and insinuating; one never knows—though one can only too often guess—from what point of view it is being expressed. Professor Kahl very capably and accurately describes the life of an American factory worker—but against an invisible standard from which a degree of "alienation" is perceived and measured. Why this standard? Where did it come from? How is it justified? We are never told. That the lot of the ordinary working man is, in any society, not the happiest, is something that we all know; it explains why Professor Kahl is writing sociological books, and why I am reviewing them, rather than standing vigilantly on the assembly line. But Professor Kahl seems to mean far more than this; only it is not possible to say what.*

The same impression is conveyed by the way "equality" and "social mobility" are treated by our authors. When Professor Kahl writes that "the 'democracy' of the American high school does not lie in equality; it is based on the fact that there is sufficient flexibility in the systems for boys and girls to associate with peers from social levels other than their own if they work at it hard enough," one's attention is caught by those inverted commas around the word "democracy." They would appear to signify that only equality of status is proper democracy, while equality of opportunity (which results in an inequality of status, with some forging ahead, others lagging behind) is not quite the real thing. This is an arguable proposition, with something to be said on both sides; but argument is exactly what Professor Kahl disdains.

As for social mobility, this concept is such a phantom that sociology soon exhausts itself in trying to seize hold of it. All societies have it; some societies have it more than others, though this too varies considerably from time

*At times, Professor Kahl stoops to downright vulgarity, as when he writes: "A crucial test of the ideology of individualism came in America after the Spanish-American War when the large corporations began to dominate the scene. No longer could the old beliefs of competition among individual businessmen be fully accepted even by the businessmen. But a beautiful substitute *was invented*: equality of opportunity in education, and fair competition within the corporations for people of similar education." (My italics.)

to time, condition to condition; and whether it is a good thing for a particular society to have, at a particular time, and in its particular circumstances, sociology is not in a position to say. Above all, what it is, is not clear, to put it mildly. According to the statistical findings, arrived at with the greatest of ingenuity, the degree of social mobility is the same today in the United States as it is in France, Russia or England, or as it was in the United States fifty years ago. I confess that I haven't the faintest idea what this means, and it tells me nothing at all about the United States, France, Russia, or England. All I can see in it is a series of utterly pointless mathematical proportions, behind which there lurks such obvious truths as that, in all societies where class privileges are not hereditary, they tend not to be inherited, and modern industrial societies can offer more opportunities for people to enter new occupations than older agricultural communities, etc., etc.

In general, both Professor Kahl and Professor Barber, like practically all their colleagues, give the distinct impression that they see in social mobility a Good Thing. Despite all their

scorn for "the Horatio Alger legend,"* they are loyal to its essential core: that getting rich is, in some mystical way, equivalent to "bettering oneself." One wishes that, on this subject, they were a bit *more* sociological. Is it really "wasteful," as they suggest, when boys of a high I.Q. and of lower-class origins do not go on to college and success? After all, it is hard to imagine an uglier society than one in which the lower classes would consist only of the less intelligent and less talented—the Epsilon Man of Huxley's *Brave New World*. But this problem does not occur to them: they are too busy demonstrating, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that it is entirely to your advantage to have a father who is the president of General Motors, rather than one who is a shopkeeper in Brownsville. Their researches, on this score, are absolutely convincing.

*It is really more than time that someone said a good word for the Horatio Alger novels. The moral of these stories is that, even if one is born very poor, one can still end up rich and successful if one is good-looking, intelligent, healthy, diligent, ambitious, and extremely lucky. I can think of no truer sociological generalization.